

Research Article

AN INVESTIGATION INTO COMPLIMENTS, OFFERS, AND ADVICE THROUGH THE LENS OF POLITENESS THEORIES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Received: May 26, 2025; Revised: June 20, 2025; Accepted: August 19, 2025

ABSTRACT

Intercultural communication is seen as crucial in everyday conversations, particularly in a global context. Several studies have suggested that communication breakdowns largely stem from English users' failure to adhere to politeness principles. This article addresses the urgent needs of English users in an intercultural communication setting by emphasizing that mastering politeness theory is key to overcoming barriers for ESL/ EFL students. The article first reviews key theoretical frameworks of politeness theories, including conversational maxims, face-saving, social norms, and recent studies as well. Building on this theoretical framework, it then aims to clarify, analyze, and interpret communication situations through short exchanges between EFL/ESL learners and native English speakers, as well as classroom observations, to identify the causes of communication breakdowns and propose remedies. Based on these findings, the article presents conclusions and pedagogical implications to assist lecturers in helping their students communicate effectively across cultures.

Keywords: conversational maxims; face-saving; politeness principles; social norms

1. Introduction

In our daily lives, we often strive to be polite to maintain interpersonal relationships and secure business transactions. Without polite elements, many conversational exchanges may break down, hence hindering the development of long-term relationships.

On a surface level, it is not difficult to recognize whether actions performed, either verbally or non-verbally, are polite or impolite. For example, offering a seat to the elderly on a bus and greeting someone for the first time are considered polite behaviors. In contrast, interrupting someone while they are speaking is seen as impolite.

Cite this article as: Truong, P. L. (2026). An investigation into compliments, offers, and advice through the lens of politeness theories in intercultural communication. *Ho Chi Minh City University of Education Journal of Science*, 23(1), 113-124. [https://doi.org/10.54607/hcmue.js.23.1.4976\(2026\)](https://doi.org/10.54607/hcmue.js.23.1.4976(2026))

However, at a deeper level, it can be more challenging to identify whether the interlocutors' actions are polite or impolite. Politeness, in this sense, is heavily influenced by cross-cultural factors. For instance, complimenting someone on their appearance, clothing, or personal belongings may be viewed as polite in one culture; however, it may be considered impolite or even taboo in other cultures.

In response to compliments, reactions vary across cultures. Generally, Westerners are often taught to say "thank you" when given a compliment to demonstrate appreciation. In contrast, individuals from some Eastern cultures may downplay the compliment as a way to show modesty. Both groups are trying to be polite and believe they are behaving appropriately within their own cultural contexts.

In cross-cultural communication, failing to observe how people from different cultures react to compliments can lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns, potentially disrupting future interactions. According to Jespersen (1965), politeness involves conforming to socially recognized standards or norms to avoid being perceived as rude or ill-mannered.

Another observational behavior in politeness theory in intercultural communication is that speakers tend to express favor toward their addressees to make them feel good. As such, politeness involves paying attention to others' individual desires during conversational exchanges. To demonstrate politeness, speakers often say things that benefit the hearers while simultaneously avoiding statements that imply costs or disagreements. For example, inviting someone to dinner or offering to help is considered polite in some cultures. In contrast, asking someone to do something for us or inquiring about personal matters may be seen as impolite.

This paper reviews key characteristics of politeness principles initiated by linguists, including the conversational maxims proposed by Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983), the face-saving concepts by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), and social norms by Jespersen (1965), and some recent studies regarding politeness theories. To demonstrate the effectiveness of the theoretical framework, short exchanges based on compliments/responses, offers/responses, and classroom observations by the researcher are illustrated, analyzed, and interpreted to show that breakdowns in intercultural communication primarily result from a lack of knowledge of politeness principles across cultures. Based on the findings, some recommendations are also suggested to overcome intercultural communication barriers.

2. An overview of politeness theories

2.1. Conversational Maxims

The view of politeness based on conversational maxims is principally grounded in Gricean cooperative principles (1967). These comprise four maxims: the maxim of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. The central point is that "in a conversation, the hearer expects

whatever the speaker says to be truthful, appropriately informative, relevant, and clear” (p. 30). These maxims guide speakers during the course of conversation. In reality, these four maxims are not always strictly observed.

When one of these maxims is violated, the hearer is expected to infer the hidden meanings conveyed by the speaker. To maintain politeness, the speaker often flouts Gricean maxims and employs an indirect strategy.

The two conversations below elucidate this concept. In the first conversation, speaker B follows the cooperative principles, while in the second conversation, speaker B violates them.

1. *A: Do you like the wine I picked out?*

B: Not really. (The speaker adheres to the maxim of relation but hurts A's feelings.)

2. *A: Do you like the wine I picked out?*

B: It's Italian, isn't it? (The speaker violates the maxim of relation but makes A feel good.)

The clarity in the two conversations mentioned may be compromised in favor of politeness. Based on Gricean cooperative principles, Lakoff (1973, pp. 292-297) outlines three sub-rules of politeness: “don't impose, give options, and make the hearer feel good and be friendly.” He suggests that the importance of these sub-rules can vary across cultures. For instance, while European cultures might favor distance and contemporary American culture often values camaraderie, Asian cultures typically emphasize deference.

Leech (1983) further delves into his politeness principles, defining it as a balance between factors such as cost vs. benefit, praise vs. dispraise, agreement vs. disagreement, and sympathy vs. antipathy, all aimed at maximizing benefits for the hearers while minimizing costs. For example, while “Peel these potatoes” may seem impolite, “Have another sandwich” is generally perceived as polite. Overall, Leech's model can be summarized as follows:

1. Tact Maxim: Minimize cost to others, maximize benefits to others.
2. Generosity Maxim: Minimize benefit to self, maximize cost to self.
3. Approbation Maxim: Minimize dispraise of others, maximize praise of others.
4. Modesty Maxim: Minimize praise of self, maximize dispraise of self.
5. Agreement Maxim: Minimize disagreement between self and others, maximize agreement between self and others.
6. Sympathy Maxim: Minimize antipathy between self and others, maximize sympathy between self and others.

Leech also concurs with Lakoff in acknowledging that the six maxims above operate differently across various cultures. For instance, the modesty maxim is particularly important in Chinese culture, whereas the agreement maxim is more prevalent in American culture.

2.2. Face Theory

Another significant politeness theory is the Face Theory introduced by Brown and Levinson (1978), which builds on the concept of “face” initially developed by Goffman in

the late 1950s. They argue that face is a crucial aspect of every individual that communicators should consider during interactions with listeners.

Brown and Levinson define face as an individual's self-esteem, distinguishing between two types: positive and negative. Positive face refers to the desire to be liked, approved of, and accepted by others, while negative face pertains to the desire to be free from imposition by others.

2.3. Social Norms

The social norm approach (Jespersen, 1965) posits that each society has its own set of rules and standards. Politeness involves being aware of one's social obligations to others. Accordingly, the notion of face is not merely about ignoring individual wants; rather, it is related to social expectations, with face-threatening acts viewed as failures to fulfill societal desires.

The social norm approach has gained prominence in second language acquisition because it explains the differences in politeness behaviors among individuals and contributes significantly to our understanding of culture shock in intercultural interactions. When communicating with people from other cultures, speakers often assimilate their values, beliefs, lifestyles, and linguistic features from their first language into their second language communication. This occurs because they are taught appropriate norms from childhood within their cultural context. Without cross-cultural awareness, they may subconsciously transfer their first language pragmatics and discourse norms into their interactions, leading to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

2.4. Contemporary Studies on Politeness Theories

Recently, politeness theories have been widely introduced into various aspects of everyday life, including culture, education, the workplace, politics, travel, entertainment, and transportation (Battezzato, 2020; Beom, 2010; Hu et al., 2019; Mashrabovna & A'zamajonovna, 2022) The advent of the digital era enables polite behaviors to extend beyond offline interactions into online communication, crossing borders and emphasizing accepted online norms such as anonymity, non-verbal cues, and community influence (Hoa, 2023; Locher, 2010; Martin & Nakayama, 2010)).

Linguists have explored the domain of conversational analysis, examining various aspects such as compliments, complaints, invitations, advice, requests, greetings, apologies, conflict resolution, and persuasive spoken and written discourse. The primary objective is to help participants avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings, manage stressful interactions, maintain turn-taking, and reinforce interpersonal relationships (Babel et al., 2022; Blitvich & Sifianou, 2019).

3. Case Studies

3.1. Methodology

This study is a qualitative content analysis aimed at searching, selecting, analyzing, elaborating on, and synthesizing previously published materials in the relevant literature. It demonstrates how selected case studies can be explained in light of politeness theories.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study results, dialogues were drawn from reputable textbooks and articles on intercultural communication. These include *Cross-Puzzles* by Baxter et al. (1987), published articles in renowned journals of science, and the researcher's observations in an intercultural communication class at Dong Nai University.

3.2. Compliments/Responses

Compliments are essential in everyday conversation, as they help maintain interpersonal relationships. Every language has various words, phrases, idiomatic expressions, and grammatical structures to express compliments.

In English, constructions such as “NP/Pro + be/look/like/love + (really) + adj” are frequently used to express compliments. For instance, phrases like “Your house is really beautiful,” “I really like your shirt,” and “That is really a great paper” are commonly employed to praise others.

On a surface level, collectivist cultures (such as Vietnamese culture) and Western cultures (such as American culture) may resemble each other in their use of lexical and grammatical patterns to express compliments. However, significant discrepancies exist in conversational topics and the ways of responding to compliments in cross-cultural communication.

English speakers often discuss a variety of topics related to compliments, including physical appearance, personality, family members, friends, capabilities, belongings, and food and drinks. These topics reflect appreciation and concern for addressees. This approach aligns with the concept of positive politeness, as described by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), where individuals express a desire to be liked, approved of, and accepted by others.

Consequently, it is common for English speakers to regularly compliment their friends in various conversations. From the perspective of individuals from collectivist cultures, however, such compliments may be perceived as flattery or insincerity, making recipients feel uncomfortable receiving them in this manner.

Individuals in collectivist cultures, on the other hand, tend to use fewer compliments compared to their Western counterparts. Traditionally, a husband may refrain from complimenting his wife on her appearance, possessions, or good deeds, and a father rarely praises his son's accomplishments. If a husband or father frequently praises his wife or son in public, he may be perceived as lacking modesty or being overly boastful. Collectivist cultures generally prioritize the maxim of modesty, as proposed by Leech (1983), which advises minimizing self-praise and maximizing self-deprecation. As a result, personal topics such as physical appearance, clothing, food, and possessions are often avoided in collectivist societies.

Secondly, regarding the giving and receiving of compliments, people from different cultures react in various ways. To illustrate these differences, consider the following scenarios.

Situation 1:

Jonathan is a teacher in an adult school class in the United States. After class, he speaks to Anh, a Vietnamese student (Source: *The Culture Puzzle*, p. 17)

Jonathan: “Anh, your English is improving. I am pleased with your work.”

Anh: (Looking down) “Oh, no, my English is not very good at all.” (Note: denial of the compliment.)

Jonathan: “Why do you say that, Anh? You are doing very well in class.”

Anh: “No, I am not a very good student.” (Note: denial of the compliment.)

Jonathan: “Anh, you are making progress in class. You should be proud of your English.”

Anh: “No, it’s not true. You are a good teacher, but I am not a very good student.” (Note: denial of the compliment again, with reassignment of her success to the teacher rather than herself.)

Jonathan: (Surprised by her response, he wonders why she thinks her English is so bad and is uncertain if he should stop complimenting her.)

This is a culturally sensitive situation, often known as a cultural dilemma. In this case, a misunderstanding arises between two participants: an American teacher and a Vietnamese student. When the teacher compliments his student’s progress in English, he aims to express his delight about his student’s achievement and implicitly encourages her extra efforts for the future. Complimenting someone who deserves praise is very common in Western cultures, where the recipient typically responds with gratitude by saying “thank you.” However, in collectivist cultures, people rarely compliment others unless the recipients genuinely deserve it. Additionally, in response to a compliment, recipients often deny the praise to demonstrate their modesty.

In light of the conversational maxims, Anh’s responses to her teacher’s compliment can be explained by Leech’s maxim of modesty (1983), which emphasizes minimizing self-praise and maximizing self-dispraise. Her denial or self-denigration in response to the compliment is culturally specific to collectivist societies. While modesty is considered a universal value across many cultures, it is particularly characterized by self-denigration in traditional Chinese culture (Tian, 2006, p.75). This is influenced by Confucian principles that advocate for humility and respect for others. Such a cultural framework shapes perceptions of politeness in collectivist cultures, including Vietnamese culture.

Tran (2006, p.50) explained this phenomenon in terms of “pragmatic and discourse transfer.” She defines pragmatic and discourse transfer as the process by which learners transfer their first language’s (L1) pragmatic and discourse norms of politeness and

appropriateness into their second language (L2) production. In simpler terms, the socio-cultural and linguistic norms of politeness from their L1 influence their L2 performance.

In the conversation mentioned above, Anh is transferring her first language's pragmatic and discourse norms into her English responses. By denying the compliment, she demonstrates modesty, which is typical in her culture. She unconsciously applies these cultural norms to the American context.

Below is an improved version of the conversation between Anh and her American teacher after she has acquired a deeper understanding of the American culture.

Revised situation 1:

Jonathan: "Anh, your English is improving. I am pleased with your work."

Anh: (Making eye contact) "Thank you. I have learned a lot in this course." (Anh expresses appreciation by saying thank you and adds more information to continue the conversation.)

Jonathan: "You are doing really well, and I can see real progress."

Anh: "I enjoy studying English. I do my homework every night." (She appreciates the teacher's praise again by explaining her progress.)

Jonathan: "I can see that. Keep up the good work."

Anh: "I'll try. You are a great teacher, and you have helped me a lot." (She thanks the teacher, returns the praise, and promises to keep improving in English.)

Anh's response to her teacher's compliment has improved as she becomes aware of the differences between her own culture and American culture. She now makes a conscious effort to say "thank you" instead of denying the compliment, as she would have in her own country. Additionally, she keeps the conversation flowing by providing more information and returning praise to her teacher, demonstrating her understanding of the Maxim of Agreement in American culture.

3.3. Offers/Responses

Offering to do something for someone or doing a favor is an important aspect of politeness in cross-cultural communication. When making an offer, speakers aim to adhere to the maxim of generosity, which involves minimizing their own benefits and maximizing any costs to themselves. This act of kindness is intended to demonstrate that the speaker cares for the listener's benefit.

Offering is considered good etiquette in everyday conversation. However, it can also be viewed as a face-threatening act (FTA), as it may impose on someone and potentially affect negative politeness. To mitigate this imposition, speakers often employ indirect strategies, allowing listeners the option to accept or decline the offer. Common phrases include "Would you mind if...?", "How about...?", and "I wonder if...?".

Cultural perspectives on offering and invitation vary widely. In collectivist cultures, the typical response pattern is: *offer, refusal, offer, refusal, offer, and acceptance*. The invitees

often initially refuse to demonstrate politeness, as accepting immediately may impose on the host. This behavior reflects the principle of negative politeness, allowing the invitees to accept the invitation the second time while still maintaining politeness.

Invitees in Western cultures, on the other hand, tend to respond directly, clearly expressing their thoughts with answers like “Yes, I’d love to, thanks” or “No, thanks” (possibly with a reason). People in these cultures prefer directness, reflecting an orientation toward a “culture of directness.” They express the Maxim of Agreement and Positive Politeness, demonstrating a desire to be liked by others.

The following situations illustrate these differences further.

Situation 2:

A Chinese guest has been at a hostess’s house for a while, and it is almost time for dinner. (Source: *Politeness: Is there an East–West Divide?* Leech, p. 10).

A: “How about you staying and taking potluck with us tonight?” (Offering)

B: “No, no, please don’t bother.” (Refusal of the offer)

A: “What trouble? I’ll just fry a few dishes, and it’ll be done soon.” (Insisting the guest accept the offer)

B: “I’d better go home today. Anyway, I’m not really hungry. I’ll trouble you next time.” (Once again, the guest refuses the offer)

A: “Come on. Since you’ve already been here, just take potluck with us. We’ll have to eat something anyway.” (Reissuing the offer)

B: “Well, well... I will bother you this time.” (Accepting the invitation)

In this short exchange, the guest refuses the invitation twice before reluctantly accepting, a typical response for Chinese and other collectivist cultures like Vietnamese Culture. The formulaic expressions used for refusal, such as “Please don’t bother,” are distinctly Chinese. However, Westerners may misinterpret this phrase, as it carries a negative connotation in English, often implying annoyance, as in “Don’t bother me when I’m studying.”

3.4. *Advice/Responses*

Giving advice is a common occurrence in everyday interactions. When offering advice, people often aim to express friendliness, concern, admiration, interest, or a desire to share with those they care about. However, advice-giving may vary according to the cultural norms of each society.

Westerners rarely give advice. They state that each person has the freedom and responsibility to make their own choices. Therefore, giving orders or unsolicited advice is often inappropriate and impolite. Wierzbicka (1991) observed:

In English-speaking societies based on the tradition which places special emphasis on the rights and autonomy of every individual, which abhors interference in other people’s affair, Which respects every one’s privacy, which approves of compromises and disapproves of

dogmatism of any kind; the giving advice generally has a negative socio-cultural and interactional value, and can be perceived as intrusive and overbearing for example. (p.30)

To understand why topics such as giving advice are rarely accepted by Westerners, particularly the English, it is important to note that privacy and individualism are core values in these cultures. Therefore, the concept of negative politeness described by Brown and Levinson is particularly relevant. Other personal topics—such as asking about age, marital status, income, children, religious beliefs, and political views—are often considered taboo because they encroach on individuals' privacy.

In contrast, in collectivist cultures, giving advice and asking personal questions, such as age, is generally accepted and even welcomed, as these behaviors are seen as polite gestures that express warmth and concern for loved ones. From a pragmatic perspective, Leech's maxim of sympathy functions effectively in these contexts. This maxim aligns with the third aspect of attitudinal warmth identified by the Chinese scholar, Gu (1992, pp. 30-32), who emphasizes maximizing sympathy and showing concern for interlocutors.

Culturally, collectivist societies prioritize community values over individualism, which makes expressing concern for others essential. Individuals from these cultures often use more forceful expressions when giving advice, such as "You'd better...", "You have to...", or "You must..." to convey urgency.

In contrast, Western countries typically favor directness. Leech (2005) notes that advice in these contexts is often accompanied by "markers of unreality, conditionality, and tentativeness" (p. 20). Examples of these markers include phrases like "If I were you, I would...", "It wouldn't be better if...", "Could I suggest...", "I don't think you should...", "How about...?" and "Do you think you should...?" In some cases, individuals may even choose silence to express condolence. These expressions are not only formulaic but also culturally sensitive.

3.5. Class Observation

To examine how cultures influence students' responses to compliments, the researcher also observed two class sessions of an Intercultural Communication course at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai University, on April 18, 2025. This class included 45 second-year students of English Education, who enrolled in a 2-credit compulsory Cross-Cultural Communication module.

The observation utilized Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to analyze the impact of cross-cultural differences on the participants. The textbook used was *The Culture Puzzle: Cross-Cultural Communication for English as a Second Language* by Baxter, Levin, and McNulty, focusing on Chapter 2: Complimenting and Showing Appreciation (p. 16). The observation lasted 90 minutes. During class activities, the researcher noted that the instructor divided the class into small groups to role-play situations involving giving and responding to compliments. Familiar topics for compliments included school progress, clothing, and personal belongings.

The observation indicated that the majority of student participants favored the modesty maxim, often denying compliments to demonstrate modesty rather than accepting them. While a few students acknowledged compliments, they quickly redirected them to third parties, implying that their achievements were due to the support of others.

The findings from the class observation assert that cross-cultural differences may influence students' responses to compliments.

4. Conclusions, limitations, and pedagogical implications for future studies

4.1. Conclusions

From the above conversational exchanges, several conclusions can be drawn regarding cross-cultural communication.

First, when communicating with speakers from English-speaking countries such as Australia and the United States, Vietnamese learners of English should practice responding to compliments with phrases like "thank you." They should also learn to follow up their responses by providing explanations or reassigning praise, rather than denying it with phrases such as "No, I don't think so," "There's nothing to it," or "You're overpraising me."

When instructing on invitations and responses, lecturers should teach learners to use "yes, please" as a positive response and "no, thanks" as a negative response, rather than phrases such as "don't bother" or "please don't go to any trouble."

Finally, lecturers should instruct students to be sensitive to advice-giving and to avoid discussing personal topics such as age, marital status, and income in cross-cultural interactions, explaining why such inquiries may be considered inappropriate

4.2. Limitations and pedagogical implications for future studies

This study is not without limitations. Since it is based solely on analyses of short exchanges between just a few native English speakers and small numbers of EFL/ESL learners, it may not represent all English learners in various contexts facing the same cross-cultural challenges. Future research should focus on other cross-cultural situations, such as greetings, apologies, requests, table manners, and expressions of thanks, involving participants from different cultures. This, in turn, would strengthen the comprehensive understanding of how intercultural communication shapes interactions among native speakers and EFL/ESL learners in diverse settings.

For effective pedagogical implementation, lecturers in cross-cultural classes should integrate contemporary cultural knowledge, particularly regarding virtual spaces like social media, the workplace, and healthcare, into their intercultural communication courses. These classes should be engaging, informative, and include activities that simulate real-life situations. Additionally, lecturers should develop case studies based on authentic scenarios, such as making complaints, offering apologies, making requests, and expressing disagreement. Organizing forums for cross-cultural exchanges and inviting experts or native

English speakers to share their experiences can further enhance learning. This approach will help students avoid misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

Finally, English lecturers should equip students with knowledge of functional linguistics, including phrases like “Would you mind...?”, “I wonder if...,” and “May I...?” This will enhance the effectiveness of intercultural communication.

❖ **Conflict of Interest:** Author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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ĐIỀU TRA VÀO LỜI KHEN, ĐỀ NGHỊ, VÀ LỜI KHUYÊN QUA GÓC NHÌN CỦA THUYẾT LỊCH SỰ TRONG GIAO TIẾP ĐA VĂN HÓA

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Ngày nhận bài: 26-5-2025; ngày nhận bài sửa: 20-6-2025; ngày duyệt đăng: 19-8-2025

TÓM TẮT

Giao tiếp đa văn hóa được xem là rất quan trọng trong đàm thoại hàng ngày, đặc biệt là trong bối cảnh toàn cầu hóa. Nhiều nghiên cứu cho thấy rằng sự cố giao tiếp phần lớn xuất phát từ việc người sử dụng tiếng Anh không tuân thủ các Nguyên tắc Lịch sự. Bài viết này đề cập nhu cầu cấp thiết của người dùng tiếng Anh trong môi trường giao tiếp đa văn hóa thông qua việc nhấn mạnh rằng việc nắm vững thuyết lịch sự là chìa khóa để vượt qua các rào cản đa văn hóa đối với sinh viên học tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ thứ hai và ngoại ngữ. Bài viết trước tiên điểm lại các khung hình lý thuyết chính của nguyên tắc lịch sự, bao gồm châm ngôn hội thoại, thuyết thể diện, và quy ước xã hội, và những nghiên cứu gần đây liên quan đến thuyết lịch sự nữa. Dựa trên khung lý thuyết này, bài viết nhằm vào làm rõ, phân tích và diễn giải các tình huống giao tiếp thông qua những đàm thoại trao đổi ngắn giữa người học tiếng Anh và người nói tiếng Anh bản ngữ, và quan sát lớp học để xác định nguyên nhân của các sự cố hiểu lầm trong giao tiếp đa văn hóa và đề xuất giải pháp. Dựa trên kết quả nghiên cứu, bài viết đưa ra kết luận và những ứng dụng sư phạm để hỗ trợ giảng viên giúp sinh viên giao tiếp hiệu quả trong môi trường đa văn hóa.

Từ khóa: phương châm hội thoại; thuyết thể diện; nguyên tắc lịch sự; quy ước xã hội